

# 2006-01-08 Four Noble Truths

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

suffering, ascetics, four noble truths, buddha, cessation, clinging, task, people, noble truths, ascetic practices, peace, person, abandon, sacred, realize, peaceful, truth, companions, develop, present

## SPEAKERS

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So this is the first Sunday of the new year that I'm here to teach. And in the beginning of the year, I'd like to mark the beginning with the talk on the Four Noble Truths, being so central, and such as the foundation, to Buddhist teachings. And I'd like to first mentioned that when the Buddha was first awakened, when he first had his awakening under the Bodhi tree, he was reluctant to teach. And he felt that whatever it was that he had experienced, attained, whatever way he'd been changed by that experience, was somehow very difficult to convey and the people wouldn't get it. So as the legend goes, the god Brahma, God window this and again, thought this was a real shame. The Buddha wasn't going to teach, take came down, talk to the Buddha. And he said, you know, you should teach. And the Buddha said, looked around the world realized. In fact, there were some people in the world who had have been a little dusty in front of their eyes. So they could see, they'll be able to see or experience what he had to teach. And then he set forth to find a find some of these people that he knew had little dust in front of their eyes. And the people he went first to find, were five ascetics who had been his companions when he had been an ascetic. For some, some six years the Buddha had engaged in the ascetic practices of India this time. And it said that he was he virtually mastered them, and until he realized that mastering them would have meant death six point Push, push the aesthetic practice to that extreme, not eating all kinds of things. And he didn't think that dying was going to help his spiritual quest. So at some point he decided to abandon those ascetic practices. And one of the things one of the Legends is that he then ate some very rich porridge that someone came and offered him maybe with cream or milk or something. And the his five companions, and they were dismayed. were discouraged or disgusted were, you know, upset that he had abandoned his aesthetic ways. And so they abandoned him and they left. So when the Buddha was going to go and find someone who had that little dust in their eyes, he thought of his five companion And so you went for a long walk from good guy to Varanasi to Banaras. where they were. And when he arrived there was arriving there. his ex companions saw him in the distance coming. And they said something like, oh, here comes that. I don't know exactly, but I remember exactly, it comes at turncoat or when it comes to that, that you know, that guy who, you know, I slipped, slipped on the path or something. And let's just basically

ignore him. Let's not talk to him. Let's not, you know, give him any heat. And when here when he walked up to them, there was something about his presence, something about his, the way he was, his manner is continent's his presence the way it was, where his companions couldn't help themselves, but to stand up and make a seat for him and offer him to sit down. So their initial idea was to just ignore the guy. But when he showed up, they said something, something about him, made it possible for them to do that. And they offered him the seat and they could have a bowl of water I guess, to wash his feet, which was a custom people walking barefoot in the dusty land. And then the Buddha said to them, Look, you know, I and now I realized in life and they said, No, no, you know, someone who's, you know, golf eating porridge. You know, can't be that way. Kind of like my son. My son wouldn't believe it, eating oatmeal and so, these are No. And then the Buddha said, Well, listen, you've known me for a long time. And have you ever known me to lie? No, no, you're an upright person. But listen to me. So they listened. And he gave his first teaching. That's called the teachings of turning the wheel of the Dharma. So here it is a man who has some transformative experience that is hard to convey that to other people. And then he was going to try felt he was these people maybe could understand. And but there was something in the context of his teaching wasn't just philosophy, you know, if you read it, read the book, you know, you say, okay, you see those teachings 1234. But the context was first teaching is somehow was out in nature, probably sitting under a tree, these people were outdoors. And these people who didn't want to give them heed, and then spell something powerful enough that they offered him a seat and then listen to what he had to say. So that's the kind of the context for what he was about to teach. And what he taught was the Four Noble Truths. And that was how he chose try to convey what he had realized. And the Four Noble Truths that were noble is the word it basically in English Aria Aria, Aria, and it's a very unfortunate, unfortunate word. It's unfortunate what happened to the words work word in the 20th century. So it's kind of like can't be used anymore. You know, squid probably another 500 years 1000 years before many of us you know, want to use it in some kind of easy way, favorable way. So, but so usually translated into English as noble perfect Because the art Aryan race, we came into India, we're kind of the noble caste of India at the time. So it's associated with nobility. But I think sometimes it's translated as holy. The word is definitely holy and probably the closest that in Buddhism, you get to a word like sacred, sacred, you know, it's kind of a Western term, latin word, right? And so we have our own associations with it. And it's a whole different religion over there in India. We probably did what comes closest to that word is probably the word. This word that translate is knowable. And I've known people that translated as the four sacred truths or the four holy truths. And then we have people who react to the word truth. Because it's like a creed, like a like a belief, and a philosophy of dogma. I know one teacher who says that what makes these things true is that when the person And who realizes the Four Noble Truths becomes a true person. So when you become a person is true, then you realize the Four Noble the Torah, the Four Noble Truths, there's nothing to do with how you are. So here the Buddha showed up with a slight ascetics. And something by maybe you become a true person is being was, was somehow truthful in that first discourse, the Buddha did not present the Four Noble Truths as philosophy. He presented them as tasks or as practices to undertake. And so each of these four noble truths represents a task that we can do. And so the question is, what is the task associated with each of these four noble truths? So, those of you who don't know about the Four Noble Truths it's important

to hear them all For them simultaneously. So probably we could have this session by three other you up here. And then I would say the first and this person is secondly, so the second and the third would say the third through a fourth. And you'd all say it's, you know, the old same time. So that you would understand that they're so they're, they're integrated together. But since I'm one person here, up here, I can only say one sentence at a time. And so you say usually the first one first. And with that, the problem with that is it gives you some kind of prominence to the first one, that it's easy to get to react to or it's really easy to get, I can kind of get me to the wrong idea. But if you could hear all four at the same time, then there's a different kind of feeling what's what's being done here. So you have to imagine you're hearing all together. So the first one is simply the truth. That suffering exists. There's suffering. That's all. That's always. And it's, it's pretty hard to argue with that. And if some people try to, but, you know, it's kind of hard to sufferings, as you know, you kind of know it when you're feeling somehow you're in pain, psychological pain, physical pain. You kind of know it. And, and then, so just a statement of kind of kind of fact. Maybe it's subjective fact, some of you experience but still experience suffering. And then there is the truth of the arising of suffering. Suffering doesn't just appear. It's not just it's not just there because just doesn't spontaneously arise. Just you know, or it's not an innate is unless something like necessarily, they were, you know, comes from beginningless time and just always they were born with it or something. It's arises because of certain conditions being present the ground for it and the arising of suffering the ground for that suffering is said to be clinging or craving, certain kind of compulsive and driven quality in our mind. And you know that driven quality, I think those times, it's very clear those times when you have some kind of drive, some kind of strong emotional reaction that you feel maybe is not so healthy to have. And you find it hard to let go of it. You feel that how driven how compulsive it might be. So there's the, the, the truth of suffering, and then there's a truth of the arising of suffering. And here the correlation is that suffering does not arise without a cause. That cause I think is understood to be something that's happening now, in the present moment of the cause. The conditions might have been in the past, but the cause is in the presence. The conditions for why we claim Hold on tight, might have to do with things that happen in our past. But the clinging is happening in the present. So that the both the suffering and the cause have to do with now. And that's one of the reasons why in Buddhism, we put a lot of emphasis on showing up into the present moment. So we can really see these things. So as to the suffering and choose to the rising of suffering. And then there's a truth of the cessation. It's called the truth of cessation, which is the truth of the end there is truth of ending clinging and entering the suffering that comes from that clinging. So there's a possibility of somehow dropping, eliminating stopping putting an end to the clinging the craving the grasping, detachment. And when that craving and grasping is eliminated, and put to rest, the suffering that comes out of it will not arise anymore. So as I like to reward it, if you claim you will suffer if you let go that clinging, that suffering land so there's a truth of cessation. And then there's a fourth truth, which is a truth of the path leading to that cessation. And that, and that is the truth that recognizes that is, even though it's not easy to do this, it's easy to say Oh, just let go of your attachment. And some of you probably have been insulted by people say I'll just let go. You know, as if it's easy to easy to do. But it's some things are easy, some things are quite difficult and because some things Difficult, it helps to create the conditions, the appropriate conditions, the ground, the soil, where release, can blossom can bloom. And so we have the Eightfold Path, the

truth, and this is called those eight steps. So that's, that's, that's the, that's the four truths. Now in each of those truths, there's a task connected to it. And so the first truth, the task is to understand suffering. And that's bad news, right? Because he had good experiences, it is experience to understand it isn't to understand it. Philosophically, abstractly. Isn't that you read some kind of book about you know, all the different aspects of suffering and then think you understand it. But, but realize it means you have to realize it in yourself. for yourself. So the Buddhist bumper sticker is I stopped for suffering. So if you suffer, you stop and you look at it, you get to know it. And it's very important to do that. Because if you don't do it, even if you can let go easily it's actually sometimes better not to let go too quickly, so that you can spend time time hanging out with your suffering and really understand it well. As human beings, we often kind of want to get over suffering quickly. Just anything, please want to look at it and we just don't want to have it I'm uncomfortable. I think it's actually very wise to be willing to stay uncomfortable for a while. And part of I think it's training and mindfulness practice is a training that, among other things, trained you how to be comfortable at ease with discomfort. A nice comfortable with discomfort so that you can really get to know it will really see it well. If you just kind of push it away quickly, you won't see it. So the first task is to see, understand, well, the suffering. And some of each of us probably has, you know, our top 10 lists for funeral are suffering and certain tendencies, certain ways and things that repeat themselves over and over again, and certain demons that follow us along. And so here you're asked to actually stop and look at it really take time. And there are many ways of doing that. It could be done in meditation, it could be done talking with a friend, just asking your friend please explore this with you. It can be done in journaling, it can be done in all kinds of ways. And being creative about that. I think it's helpful. Now, there's a wonderful teacher named John Julian I teacher and he says, There is ordinary suffering. And there's holy suffering or sacred suffering. And you know the difference between difference is that exactly the same kind of suffering. But the differences when you engage with your suffering as the first noble truth, when you engage it as part of this path, then you've made it sacred. But if you just suffer just the old fashioned way, then it's ordinary. So there's actually meant to be some some some dignity and some hope. In looking at our suffering, there's something very special that happens when you stop and look and really be with it carefully. And the suggestion I think, Julian is somehow becomes Sacred or holy or noble, when you actually engage with it in this kind of way. But you have to bring yourself sometimes required a view to make it sacred. The sufferings not sacred or ordinary, independent view, it's what you bring to it, how you understand it, how you hold it. So, the first task is to understand suffering. Now, remember, you have to hold all four of these together, otherwise you can like again depressed Now, what I experienced anymore my suffering. The second truth is the truth, the truth of the rising the cause, and here the task is to abandon it to let go of the claim and aggressively let go what we grasp and let go the grasping itself. So we grasp to pleasure. We have a version two displeasure Which is kind of grasping, we grasp to our opinions, our views, our stories. I think a huge, under appreciated form of clinging is clinging to stories. we tell ourselves human beings are story making creatures. And then we cling to those stories, stories of our past or future stories, but other people, sometimes called opinions, views, we cling to those and then we cling to self to self image. How we want to hold how we want to see ourselves, identify ourselves. And so we study suffering, you start to understanding where the clinging is, as part of the reason we study suffering to really understand where they clinging is, and I

have been totally perplexed sometimes I know I suffer. And I just can't identify where the cleaning is. I can identify well enough, where is it? What is it that have to do it? Where's it just, it's not always so easy until I've been with it long enough, or until I've gotten concentrated enough or still enough for it sometimes takes a lot of work. But sooner or later, the task is second to select all that cleaning. And there's many ways letting go happens. Sometimes it happens because you just you do something that releases some, sometimes it releases itself. You don't have any thing to do with it. And sometimes it takes you know, a lot of different things need to happen depending on the nature of that claiming, sometimes necessarily easy task, but it's a worthwhile task and no boiling task. So you will learn how to let go some deep way. The third test the third, the third noble truth is to realize the cessation so it's a bit different. On one hand, you let go. So if I'm really tight to the striker, so hard so hard and tight that, you know, I start damaging my knuckles and after a while I might realize, you know, this is not a good idea. And so I think I better let go. But I need to be really attached to being a really good striker holder. You know, it's important to receive me as a good striker holder. So I can't just let go of holding the striker and you'll see that what I'm really attached to is I want all of you to recognize what a good striker holder I am. When I see that, then maybe at some point I can let go I can I can read so there's the release that happens, letting go, the abandoning, letting go. And then without abandoning, there's the cessation, what's technically called the cessation of the clinging of the suffering. But that cessation and clinging to this striker, the cessation of clinging, creates something new. Let go of it to create something new. And that is now my hand is open. My hand is relaxed studies. It feels the breeze, coolness, and it's available to shake your hand you know to do all kinds of things. It's available now. That's sad. So the word cessation is a negative is the absence of something. But it doesn't really point to how wonderful it is. Maybe they get a sense of how wonderful it is. You remember that this five ascetics at the stand when the Buddha appeared that somehow the Buddha was someone who realizes cessation of suffering of clinging, and that made him somehow so different from how that his companions knew from the past, that they felt moved to stand up and offered a seat. Somehow, when we no longer are conflicted, or apologetic about ourselves, or diminishing ourselves, or no longer driven and always want something in grabbing something and have an agenda, but somehow can just be present let go of all the revenues, all the compulsions and offer a kind of presence. A presence in unconflicted way It's really special with a person spends is really living a hectic life. People sometimes around here work 80 hours a week. And then they're busy running around doing this in that dashing home trying to take care of whatever was done at home, hardly getting any sleep running around wanting this. It's all in the pursuit of money, fame, status, just running around like crazy. zipping in zapping this way in that way. And finally, something happens like the internet closes down. Finally, so there'd be an internet holiday, national internet consumer holiday, the internet closes down in the person's home. There's nothing to do. And so the person just sits in the chair and looks out the window. And wow, this is peaceful. You're just to sit quietly, not doing not running around all the time. This is actually peaceful. That's very nice. Thank you. So they sit down quietly enjoying that peace for a little while. And then the person we have noticed is a witness, you know, kind of peaceful, it's nice here. But you know, my mind is still racing. I'm still thinking about all the project things I have to do and this and that, and I seem to be taking four or five different things in the course of 10 seconds, jumping around all these things. This is like, you know, this is crazy. This is actually kind of painful because



personally Still long enough to have the piece of sitting still they could see how busy the mind was. And so the person well maybe I should meditate to the person may forbid, in some of all the kind of driven is of the mind jumping around all these projects, they think about plantings and all that settles down. Because all it does is feel peaceful, in my mind really peaceful, it was great, it feels happy. And then continues like after a little while. And then after a while I realized you know, something that's pretty peaceful compared to where we used to be. But I keep having basically a recurring thought over and over again about how afraid I am, seem to be fear seems to be constantly their faces, always spheres kind of. They are the edges of my mind all the time and And then if you look there's this fear and so the person looks at the fear and perhaps the fear relaxes breeze with a fear is concentrated in the fear fades away in the present what is peaceful now that is nice. This is really great. No more fear and person sits for a while like that and then realize, oh I keep thinking about myself all the time. I'm not afraid but I'm just constantly thinking about myself thinking about myself think for myself even myself. I'm not jumping around a lot but I'm just staying focused now. Listen, it's more subtle than the fear but it's always self here so self concern and it's okay tired of it. You know I've been doing it now for long enough maybe tired. Why doesn't like fit just shut up in there. And so maybe the person kind of sits up straight and takes more of a warrior approach and says, I'm not topless selfie. And lo and behold, it stops. That's much more peaceful. Thank you. Oh, that's nice. So I'm describing is that you can experience peace, a certain level of peace. And then you realize once you're stabilized that level of peace, that there are other activities of the mind other things going on that somehow are uncomfortable, agitating. you settle that, oh, that's peaceful. Get used to that peace, and you realize there's actually more agitation, it's more subtle. And then you address that and it settles more and more. And so each of those agitations is a form of suffering. Each of those represents some kind of clinging. And each of them represents a possibility of letting go of that, and then attending a deeper peace or greater peace. And that peace, a peace of letting go that piece of in Buddhism is often associated with being happy, a certain kind of happiness. So it's pieces of the greatest happiness. And what the Buddha was trying to do with the five ascetics is that he knew that they had little dust in front of their eyes, he knew that they had done a lot of spiritual practice. They have people, maybe instead of practices are not so effective in the long run. But in the short term, ascetic practices can require a person to be purified to be cleansed of a lot of attachments. If your attacks attached to sexual pleasure and sexuality, and you're being celebrated You're either going to be unhappy, or you're gonna let go. And so they probably had let go. If they were attached to money, big houses, houses on steroids then, you know, they probably worked through that probably those ascetics didn't care about that anymore. And so they'd worked through a lot. They didn't have a lot of attachments left. And they heard this teaching of the Four Noble Truths and one of them then it was able to turn that around the teachings and find what was left in his psyche around attachment quickly, and one of those five ascetics said he is Dharma I opened. So let's, you know, set a good success rate for the Buddha one out of one in five And so the cessation it's a it's a word in the negative the leads to an awesome kind of peace, to be at peace and to find that peace to actually do the work of going deeper and deeper into the psyche to really find out how deeply can we find a level of peace within us. And that kind of the paradox a little bit is that the you know, the world is pretty big. You can drive around all these freeways live in the Bay Area has been a lot of times a big world. And then you sit down, you close your eyes to meditate and

the world's gotten small. But as you kind of go in, in a sense, you start experiencing the peace that's inside whose peace is possible. It opens up again it's kind of like an hour ago. The world is big. And the inner world at peace is big and actually, in a world of peace is even bigger than the world. It's just awesomely awesome. So you really kind of plump it, you know, you're not diminishing yourself, but you actually become immense and huge in the process down bound boundaryless. And then the task of the fourth noble truth is to develop the power to develop these qualities, develop what's called right view, develop our intentionality or motivation to use Western kind of common very, very important Western term to develop our will have never worked so well for Buddhism but to develop a will or intentionality, motivation to develop our speech. So we speak in a way that's wise and harmonious with the practice. Right Action. we behave and act in wise ways. Right Livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and then finally, right concentration. So even though the second task is letting go, there's also a place in very important place in Buddhism of picking up of developing oneself. And if so, in order to let go well, you also have to develop yourself. And so that's the full path to part of development. So they go in tandem. And sometimes I kind of liken it to that of snakes shedding its skin. The snake I think, has to grow bigger, and then it sheds that old skin. So we have to go bigger with the develop ourselves develop strengths. And as we do that, they will have the capacity to let go more. So four tasks and then there's one More thing about the Four Noble Truths. There's understanding the Four Noble Truths. There's doing a task of the Four Noble Truths. And then this understanding that the task has been done. It's not meant to be an endless task, always doing this task, always on your to do list. But you're supposed to actually come to a point where the task has been complete. You've done it. The Buddha was someone who's done the task. So there's realizing you've done what has to be done in terms of understanding suffering, then what had to be done in terms of releasing clinging done what had to be done in terms of cessation letting go done what had to be done in terms of developing the path and what you get then is four sets of To me, personally four noble truths for the four tests connected the Four Noble Truths, which is four. And then the four understandings that it's been done the completion of each four, which is four. And you get, so you get 12 total. And some of you might have seen the 12 spoke Dharma wheel. And those 12 spokes are supposed to represent those 12 aspects of the Four Noble Truths. And when you have 12 spokes to the wheel, it's really strong wheel and it can roll really well. And so when the Buddha gave his first teaching to those five ascetics it's been it said that he set the wheel of the Dharma in motion and that wheel that the wheel has been rolling ever since. And Some, some time ago it rolled right into Redwood City. And, and it's really up to us, then to continue allowing that wheel to roll by our engagement in these four noble truths so from a Buddhist point of view, if you want to make your life sacred life become sacred in the application of the Four Noble Truths. And if you want to discover the deepest kind of peace that's possible. It's through the application of the Four Noble Truths. So that's the for the beginning of the year. And my hope isn't reminding you to metaphor noble truths. You can provide you with inspiration, encouragement to wholeheartedly engage yourself in the practice for this coming year. Thank you